



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Introducing Acts, 3

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Purpose

Summary

1. Proposals for the purpose of Acts are numerous, illustrating the complexity of the book; examples:
 - a. Evangelism (and/or edification).
 - b. An apology or defense of the Christian faith.
 - c. Paul's legal defense and/or to show that Christianity had been treated fairly wherever it had encountered Roman authorities (cf. Acts 18.12–17).¹
 - d. Various theological concerns.
 - e. Historical basis for the establishment and growth of the kingdom (the above from Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 335; Keener 2014, 315).

Text clue: the book's prominent theme²

2. Although other ideas have been suggested as *the* theme of Acts (e.g., conversion, Holy Spirit), none appear as consistently as the key word in the last thing Jesus told his followers before his ascension: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8 CSB) (Oster 1989, 40–45).
3. The words translated “witness,” “witness to/testify,” and “testimony” appear thirty-nine times in Acts.
 - a. Nouns meaning “witness.”
 - 1) μάρτυς (*martyr*) – 1.8, 22; 2.32; 3.15; 5.32; 6.13; 7.58; 10.39, 41; 13.31; 22.15, 20; 26.16 (13x).
 - 2) A alternative form, μάρτυρος (*martyros*), appears in 22.20 (1x).
 - b. Verbs.
 - 1) μαρτυρέω (*martyreō*) – 6.3; 10.22, 43; 13.22; 14.3; 15.8; 16.2; 22.5, 12; 23.11; 26.5 (11x).
 - 2) μαρτυρομαι (*martyromai*) – 20.26; 26.22 (2x).
 - 3) διαμαρτύρομαι (*diamartyromai*) – 2.40; 8.25; 10.42; 18.5; 20.21, 23–24; 23.11; 28.23 (9x).
 - c. Nouns meaning “testimony.”
 - 1) μαρτυρία (*martyria*) – 22.28 (1x).

¹ Keener (2014, 315) identifies two purposes for Acts, apologetic and legal; the latter was necessary because Christianity was a new religion that had to prove itself in a world that esteemed older religions, and it had no legal protection in Rome.

² For a study of the witness theme, see my *Berea Page* newsletters, vol. 7, nos. 5–7 (Jan-Feb 2026), archived at <https://www.davidanguish.com/the-berea-page>. Ideas in this section are selected from parts 1 and 2: “Can I Get a Witness?” (vol. 7, no. 5) (#s 2–5); “Witness in Action” (vol. 7, no. 6) (# 6).

- 2) μαρτύριον (*martyrion*) – 4.33; 7.44 (2x).
4. But there is more to show that the major theme of Acts is “witness” than merely the number of times the words appear.
 - a. The words are used about the same number of times in each of the book’s three major sections: chapters 1–9, 10–20, 21–28).
 - b. Major characters in Acts are described by one of the words.
 - 1) Peter and the Twelve – 1.8, 22; 2.32, 40; 3.15; 4.33; 5.32; 10.39, 41–43; 13.31.
 - 2) Stephen – 22.20.
 - 3) Paul – 18.5; 20.21, 24; 21.15, 18; 23.11; 26.16, 22; 28.23 (Oster 1989, 40–45).
 5. Think about what the book shows about the way the preachers addressed and responded to the people they encountered.
 - a. In the Jewish settings—where Paul typically went first (cf. Acts 13.46; 17.1, 10; 19.8)—they encountered fellow monotheists whom they needed to persuade that Jesus was the Messiah.
 - b. But when they met polytheistic Gentiles, they needed to defend more basic ideas (cf. Acts 17.24, 29).
 - 1) A good summation that also speaks to Gentile outreach: “Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (Acts 28.28).
 - c. Epistles written during or shortly after the time of Acts show they also had to persuade Gentiles to give up their idolatrous and illicit attitudes and behaviors (cf. Rom 1.24–32; 1 Cor 6.9–11; 1 Tim 1.8–10; 1 Pet 4.3).
 6. Words used to describe their preaching—that is, how they witnessed—also shed light on Luke’s purpose.
 - a. They were testifying (see the verbs listed above), that is, attesting to an idea to bring about belief.
 - b. They were defending (ἀπολογία, *apologia*; ἀπολογέομαι, *apologeomai*), to offer a reasoned defense – Acts 19.33; 22.1; 24.10; 25.8, 16; 26.1, 24 (8x).
 - c. They were seeking to persuade (πείθω, *peithō*; 17x) by reasoning (διαλέγομαι, *dialegomai*) – 17.2, 17; 18.4, 19; 19.8; 20.7, 9; 24.12, 25 (10x).

In light of Luke’s purpose statement

7. The purpose statement in Luke 1.1–4 says Luke intended to write an orderly account to provide assurance and an apology for the Christian faith; Acts continues and extends that purpose, showing how Jesus’ teaching spiraled outward from Jerusalem and Palestine deeper and deeper into the Greco-Roman world.
8. Thus, Acts is a historical apologetic that explains and defends God’s plan for making the good news available and extending it to the Gentiles while continuing to include Jews as well.
9. Summary: “Luke’s purpose was to write an accurate historical narrative designed to edify his Christian readers and to help them evangelize unbelievers” (#s 7–9 are from Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 336–337).

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Works Cited

- Köstenberger, Andreas J., L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. 2009. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*. B & H Academic.
- Keener, Craig S. 2014. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*. 2nd edition. InterVarsity Press.
- Oster, Richard. 1989. “An Overview: Walking Through Acts, 1.” *Acts, The Spreading Flame: An Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*. Harding University’s 1989 Lectures. Harding University.